

New Nonfiction by Larry Abbott: The Photographic Self-Portraits of Ron Whitehead

There Is No Such Thing as an Unwounded Soldier

Ron Whitehead works in a variety of photographic series: *Eye of the Storm* are impressionistic visions of war to give a more dynamic view of combat than a strictly documentary approach. One work shows a flaming parachutist plunging toward the ground; another shows a jet fighter in a lightning storm; a third shows a helicopter and tank silhouetted by flames; *Looking Back* focuses on the impact of the past on the present, specifically the transition from his military experience to civilian life; *My Lighthouse* was inspired by a song by the Rend Collective and expresses his commitment to the Christian faith and how his commitment can calm the inner storm and offer a sense of healing; *Art of Healing* expresses the ways that art can be instrumental in the post-war healing process but also that this process is tentative; the images in *Fight for It* reference the brutal nature of war; *American Dream* is ironic in that the photographs show more a problematic re-adjustment rather than a return to a perfect life.

Although his oeuvre encompasses a variety of imagery, including some where the camera itself is the subject, Whitehead's reflexive self-portraits are the predominant images in his work over his career, not in an egocentric way but as an artistic mediation of how he negotiates the past and the present. The photographs suggest that, post-war, Whitehead is "in pieces," no longer a unified whole, but also that he is searching for ways to re-establish an integrated self. The self-portraits negotiate the space between the past

of war and the present of job, home, family, community, and the larger society. His work objectifies the inner conflicts between “the face of war” and “the face of after-war.” The photographs express T.S. Eliot’s concept of the objective correlative (1921), in that they represent Whitehead’s emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The self-portraits appear in many forms, some literal, some abstract, some surrealistic, some humorous, but each expresses the effect of his return to post-war life and provides the viewer with an insight into these perceptions. He occasionally blends text to complement the image. In her discussion of the ways that the arts, particularly poetry, tell us about war, Janis Stout (2005) writes that “literature and other cultural products offer an indispensable means of gaining impressions of war . . . not only are such cultural products ends in themselves, they are also means to the end of gaining insight into how the war was experienced and perceived by specific human beings” (2005). Whitehead’s self-portraits reveal how *his* war, and *his* return, were experienced.

One of the themes that emerges from the self-portraits is that of the split self. There is a schism between the self that went to war, the pre-war self, and the sense of self after war. Whitehead began exploring this theme photographing a colleague, Harry Quiroga. In “Still Serving” (2013), an early work from the *Art of Healing* series, Whitehead’s photograph of Quiroga’s face is split (the same image appears in “Love a Veteran,” which includes a quote from Welby O’Brien: “It takes an exceptional person to love a warrior/especially a warrior whose war will never cease”). In the photograph Quiroga, dressed in a business suit and tie, stares into the camera. One side of his face is “normal,” representing the apparent seamless transition back into the world of work and formality. The other side of his face retains the camouflage paint from the war, suggesting that even back in “the world” the soldier retains the indelible “paint” of war. In another iteration of this image (2013) the

photograph is “torn” down the center, with the “now” side in color and the “war” side in black and white. The idea of the split self appears in a number of other works. “Smoke and Mirrors” (2014) takes another angle on the split self. Whitehead’s face is in profile, enveloped by wisps of smoke. Superimposed on the profile is an image of his smiling younger self in his Army uniform. The past is never far from the present. In a 2018 work from *My Lighthouse* Whitehead is centered in the frame. On the right-hand side a lighthouse beam brightens half of his face. On the left, his face is darkened by the smoke of battle in the desert. The photograph highlights the stress of living in two antithetical worlds. In “Two Face” (2013) there are mirror images of Whitehead’s face looking at the viewer. Half of the face on the right is “normal,” while the other half is in camouflage. The face on the left is again split, with the right side of *that* face in camouflage; Whitehead adds a twist with his “normal” face in profile on the left side. “Two Sides” (2017) extends the theme of the split self. In the photograph there are two identical and connected faces in partial profile looking in opposite directions. Razor ribbon coils around the faces. The expression of duality emerges with some variation in such works from the *Looking Back* series as “Mask,” “Mask 2,” “Façade,” and “Façade Mask” (each 2018). In these Whitehead places a mask of his face on or near his “real” face. In “Façade 2” Whitehead is in black and white, while the mask he is putting on and the hand holding it is in color. In “Façade Mask” Whitehead is looking at the camera while, ambiguously, pulling a mask over his face or, perhaps, removing it. Is he removing his “face to the world” to reveal his authentic self? Or is he in the process of pulling down the mask to hide that self? Superimposed on the image is a scene from Desert Storm with burning oil fields. Likewise, in “Mask,” oil fields burn in the background while he holds a mask in front of him. Each of these “Mask” portraits speaks to the tension between the memories of the war which affect the present and the need to forget the war and reintegrate into

society. As the text in “Remembering” (2014) states: “Remembering Is Easy. It’s Forgetting That’s Hard.”



Other portraits are more abstract but still reveal the psychic dislocation he felt after his discharge and return to the States. “Looking Back 2” (2017) borders on the surrealistic. In this work Whitehead creates a distressing and baffling effect by using horizontal strips to break the image of his face into incongruous components. Each “strip” is a different part of his face that do not align connoting, again, a sense of psychic disharmony. The same effect is seen in “Parts” (2017). In this work the strips, smaller but more numerous, re-arrange his face. “Torn” (2018) is a variation on the use of the strips. In this work Whitehead’s face, in black and white, is facing the viewer, superimposed over a desert scene. However, a strip is “torn” across his eyes, revealing eyes, in color, staring at the viewer. This creates a contrast not only in the blend of black and white and color, but also an opposition between past and present. “Ripped” (2018) also uses this motif. There is a close-up of Whitehead’s face in grainy black and white. A strip is torn off to reveal his eyes, in a horizontal panel, in color. This smaller panel is superimposed on the desert scene of burning oil wells. He is looking out from the war, and that only the war provides any color. (In “Rear View” [2015] the point of

view is from a driver looking out of the car's windshield. The road ahead and the surroundings are in black and white; in the rear-view mirror is a group of Whitehead's fellow soldiers, in color). "Bullets" (2017) is another variation on the use of the strips. In this case the strips are bullets, and his facial features are on the shell casings. "Broken 1," "Broken 2," and "Explode" (each 2018) use the same image of his face. In "1," part of his face is shattered, looking like exploding shards of glass. In "2," the image of the exploding face is superimposed over a tank. In "Explode" the impact of the war is more explicit. Whitehead's face is on the right side of the frame; the exploding shards are smaller, and as the image gives a sense of movement from right to left the shards blend with the smoke and flames of burning oil wells.

[RW 1](#)

"Picking Up the Pieces" (and the related numbers "2" and "3," each 2018) are similar to the portraits using the strips. In each of these Whitehead's face becomes a jigsaw puzzle with pieces detached from his face, making his appearance enigmatic and fragmentary. In the first work part of Whitehead's face in black and white is dimly seen behind other parts that are in color. Two jigsaw pieces of his eyes, in color, are where his eyes should be. But are they to be placed into the puzzle of the face, to make the face whole? In "2" Whitehead, holding a hand in front of his face, stares at the viewer through eyes that are jigsaw pieces. There are empty spaces in parts of face where the pieces are missing, revealing blue sky and clouds in the background ("Hands 6" [2018] is a variation on the motif). "3" references the war more directly. Whitehead stares at the camera and reaches toward the viewer with a jigsaw piece, on which are an eye and a

scene of battle. Other pieces have desert scenes, with a burning desert in the background. By handing the puzzle piece to the viewer Whitehead may be trying to bring the war out of his consciousness and share his experience. "3" is an attempt to put all the pieces of his life back together and to represent in these photographs Lois Lowry's words that are embedded in another photograph, "Sacrifice" (2014): "The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It's the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared." Art is a way of sharing painful memories, a cathartic process. By offering the viewer the puzzle piece Whitehead shares his memories.

[RW 2](#)

"Just Another Day" (2018), from *American Dream*, is a portrait that reveals by what is *not* shown. There is a figure in a medium shot, dressed in a suit and tie, representing the "uniform" of the civilian world of work. However, in place of the head is a white cloud (perhaps smoke from a battle). The headless figure "wears" a tanker's camouflage helmet on which is perched dark goggles, symbolizing the military world. The title suggests both the repetition of the civilian world of the "daily grind" and also that the memories of war uneasily co-exist with the civilian world. The absence of the face, replaced by the smoke, suggests that these two disparate worlds somehow neutralize one's identity. Whitehead was an infantryman in the 1st Armored Division and became a Bradley Fighting Vehicle (BFV) driver in Desert Storm, and a particular vehicle, nicknamed "Terminator," is pictured in some photographs, like "Driver's Eye" and "Globe 2" (both 2018).

RW 4

There is a humorous undertone in some photographs with Whitehead in the pose of Clark Kent ready to take off his civilian clothes to reveal his real identity. In "Still Serving Office" (2018) Whitehead is dressed in suit and tie (with tie "blowing in the wind"), with a city scene of office buildings in the background; opening his suit jacket reveals an image of his smiling teenage self in his army uniform.

SM_BDU (2018) uses the same image of Whitehead in suit and tie, but the background is a lightning-flecked American flag.

He opens his suit jacket to show his army uniform. Whitehead is conveying the idea that the formal dress is a type of camouflage; underneath the suit and tie, hidden from the view of the civilian world, is the most meaningful self. On a more serious note, Whitehead in suit and tie also appears in one of the works in *My Lighthouse*. An image of a lighthouse is revealed on his chest when he opens his jacket. Whitehead is superimposed on a battle scene with a map of Kuwait. The lighthouse represents the delicate balance of hope and stability while the war still rages in his mind.

RW 5

Eyes and hands are an important part of Whitehead's self-portraits. In a number of photographs eyes and hands are disembodied, existing on their own. In "Hands" and "Hands 4" (both 2018) two hands with open palms are centered in the frame. The skin and lines on the hands have been replaced by images of Whitehead's fellow soldiers from Desert Storm. Behind the hands is the familiar desert scene with smoke and flames from the burning oil wells. Similarly, in "Hands 2" (2018) his hands are crossed, and on the palms is an image of

a tank in battle; the background is a desert scene resembling a maelstrom or a tornado. The memories of the war are literally imprinted on the soldier's body. The flesh, the "reality" of the hands, is erased; the memories and perceptions take over. In "Hourglass" (2018) two hands hold an hourglass. The sand in the top bulb creates an image of a tank in a burning desert. The sand passes through the neck into the lower bulb; in this bulb an image of Whitehead's face is gradually formed by the sand. The war "sand" creates Whitehead; the two bulbs are symmetrical, each connected to the other. The war is being poured into Whitehead. In "Contain" (2018) Whitehead grips a glass globe in his two hands. (On his left wrist he wears a bracelet he made from his Combat Infantryman's Badge). Inside the globe is desert scene of war. The photograph suggests that Whitehead is attempting to "contain" or control the forces of war in which he participated. "Hand in Mirror" and "Mirror" (both 2015) are similar. In the former, Whitehead stands at a bathroom mirror and extends his hand toward it. However, his image is not reflected; the image in the mirror is a scene of war, and part of his hand seems to disappear into the mirror image, again suggesting that memories and perceptions of one's war experiences are inescapable, and that there is a desire to reach back into that experience. In the latter, he stands at the same mirror. This time, the reflected image is Whitehead . . . as a teenager dressed in fatigues, seeking perhaps an impossible connection between past and present. Whitehead follows this search for connection in two untitled 2022 works. In one, he stands in front of a brick wall with an image of a war scene, as if on the other side of the wall. He is reaching through the wall toward the scene. Utilizing a similar image (without the wall), a crucifix is suspended over the war scene. He is reaching toward the cross. Taken together, the two photographs reveal the tension between the desire to reconnect to the war experience and the desire for peace which the cross evokes. Can the two desires portrayed in the images co-exist?

RW 6

The eye as a subject in itself becomes an important part of the self-portrait, as the eye both looks out while at the same time takes in. Like a photograph, the eye records, and this visual document can be permanent. "Paper Eye" (2018) shows a scene of a desert aflame with burning oil wells. A strip torn from the image reveals an eye staring back at the viewer. "Eye" (2018) shows an extreme close up of an eye. Superimposed on the pupil is a tank, and smoke and flames blow through the sclera. In "Looking Back Flame Eye" (2017) the pupil emits a large flame. Within the flame is a disabled tank. A similar image is in "Looking Back Flames" (2018). In this work the pupil is engulfed in flames while an invasion map of Kuwait emerges from the flames. In "Pop Out" (2018) there is a close-up of an eye in profile superimposed on a burning desert. The eye explodes outward in fragment that resembles a map of Iraq. Imprinted on this fragment is an image of the teenage Whitehead in his Army uniform. "Eye Lens" (n.d.) is a variation. Again, there is a close-up of an eye with a scene of a burning desert. But in a twist, the pupil is a camera lens, suggesting that the images of war become permanent photographs in the mind. "Broke" (2018) shows a close-up of a pupil shattered like glass; inside the pupil is a tank. Surrounding the broken pupil is a length of barbed wire. In "Camera" (2018) there is a close-up of a Canon Eos. In the camera's lens there is a human eye with images of captured enemy soldiers. The scene of death is so powerful that even the camera lens explodes, sending pieces of glass toward the viewer. The uneasy relationship between war and post-war lives emerges in a work in the *My Lighthouse* series. On the right side of the frame a cross is superimposed on a close-up of an eyeball; on the left is a lighthouse casting a beam of light on the eye. The lighthouse rises from a war

scene in the desert.

[RW 7](#)

It might be unusual to consider a skull as a form of self-portrait but this image appears occasionally in Whitehead's work. "Skull" (2017) is one of his more disturbing, yet more powerful, self-portraits. Whitehead is in medium shot framed against the background of burning oil wells. However, most of his face is a skull with a vacant eye socket and clenched teeth; superimposed over his neck and part of the face is an American flag. There is an uneasy relationship between life and death. For the combat soldier the line between life and death, living flesh and the fleshless skull, shifts by the minute, by the second, by feet and inches. The skull also figures in three untitled works from 2023. Two of the photographs use similar imagery. Whitehead, in jeans and t-shirt and carrying a backpack, is on a highway, moving toward a skull in the distance, set in a desert of smoke and flames. Is this a rendezvous with death even after thirty years? In another untitled photograph a skull is in profile with its top and lower jaw missing. A burning desert is superimposed. The empty skull holds a dozen small paintbrushes. Whitehead suggests that death and war could be transformed by, and into, art.

[RW 8](#)

Some recent untitled work takes a different approach to the self-portrait. Three photographs from 2021 show him facing the camera or in profile, and what looks to be a primal scream

emanates from him. The smoke and flames of a burning desert are superimposed around his face. In two photographs Whitehead seems to be on fire. In another close-up the screaming face, with a reddish tinge, is speckled with black flecks, giving the appearance of ashes. In another work he stands in the desert like a colossus. In one work from 2022 Whitehead looks up at a sky of smoke and flame; in two others his body is partly composed of Polaroid One Step 60-second snapshots, creating an ambiguity of who is the "real" figure and who is a disembodied group of snapshots (another photograph shows the camera printing a photograph of his younger self in the Army). In a more surrealistic work his head is tilted forward over a desert scene. His face is not flesh but comprised of the browns and greens of camouflage, which drips into a sinkhole in the sand. It is as if Whitehead's identity is melting into the sand.

[RW 9](#)

A 2021 untitled photograph shows Whitehead, with a philosophical, thoughtful expression, against a backdrop of a Desert Storm scene. The text embedded on the left side of the frame reads, as if Whitehead is pondering the message, "You Live Life Looking Forward/You Understand Life Looking Backward." This phrase reflects one of the major concerns of Whitehead's work. The bulk of his photographs explore the interaction of past and present, and seek, through the artistic image, an understanding of the past, especially war, and its continuing impact on his life today. It is an on-going search for unity and coherence. His art is a type of bulwark against chaos, and attempts to recapture memories and make sense of the past as it impacts the present, and to commemorate that past, although painful in certain aspects, to make permanent the evanescent, and to reconcile opposites in

that search for unity.

Ron Whitehead joined the Army right out of high school, serving for four years as an infantryman. He was initially stationed at Fort Polk in Louisiana and then to Bamberg, Germany. He deployed to Iraq in 1990 and fought in Desert Storm with the 1st Armored Division. After discharge he joined the Maryland National Guard and entered Messiah College in Pennsylvania. He has an undergraduate degree in Art Education and a Master's degree in Instructional Technology from Western Connecticut State University. He has been teaching high school art in Ossining, New York, for almost thirty years. He continues to work with veterans whenever he can. One of his passionate endeavors is to bring students to the VA hospital in New Haven, CT. The students listen to the stories of vets and turn those stories into art as a way to honor the veteran.

A selection of Whitehead's work can be viewed here:
<https://sites.google.com/view/ron-whiteheads-portfolio/home>

Eliot, T.S. "Hamlet and His Problems," in *The Sacred Wood*, 1921. "The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an 'objective correlative'; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

https://www.academia.edu/796652/Hamlet_and_his_problems, p. 4

Stout, Janis. *Coming Out of War*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2005, p. xiv.